

Afghan Journalists Tour Canada to Share "Afghanistan's Story"



Mehria Azizi, a camerawoman for the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA), and Najiba Ayubi, director of The Killid Group.
Photos: Behisht Niazman

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– **Najiba Ayubi.**

To commemorate the 17th Jailed Journalists Support Day, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Reporters Without Borders Canada invited two Afghan journalists to tour five Canadian cities to speak about freedom of the press and the role of women in Afghanistan.

Najiba Ayubi, director of [The Killid Group](#), a multimedia, public information and distribution company, and Mehria Azizi, a camerawoman for the nongovernmental organization [Aina](#), visited Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, and Calgary from November 17 to November 23, 2006 where they spoke about the status of women in Afghan society and the state of the Afghan media.

The public events included the screening of *Afghanistan Unveiled*, a documentary shot in 2003 by the first team of women video journalists trained in Afghanistan. The 14 young women, including Azizi, traveled to rural areas of Afghanistan to capture on film the effects of Taliban rule and the 2001 bombing campaign on Afghan women.

Though screened at a number of film festivals around the world, the documentary had never before been seen in Canada, and it is unlikely to be shown in Afghanistan.

“It’s dangerous, it’s like a bomb,” confirms Azizi.

Ongoing influence

The film reveals the influence the Taliban continues to exert five years after their removal from power. Many of the policies and practices implemented during their five-year reign continue to hold sway.

Under the Taliban, women lived under strict rules – they could not work or study, or venture outside without a male relative, and then, only when wearing the *burqa*, the full-body veil.

Ayubi had been working in media for years when the Taliban took over in 1996. She was forced to abandon up her job and her home in the province of Parwan and return to Kabul. After three months, she left Afghanistan for Tehran, Iran where she opened a school for Afghani children. After the fall of the Taliban, she returned to Afghanistan to a high-level media management position.

“It’s my job as a journalist to broadcast the story of Afghanistan to the world,” says Ayubi. “I continue to be a journalist because I feel a need to share what I know. It’s important to create awareness.”

Dreams...an exercise in futility

Now in her early twenties, Azizi grew up under the shadow of the Taliban. Though as a woman her opportunities were scarce, she continued to have ambitions.

“Everyone has a dream – boys and girls. When I was five or six years old I would see camera people on TV and I’d think ‘I want to be like this’.”



Kady O'Malley and Mehria Azizi in Ottawa.

In 2002, not long after the Taliban were overthrown, Azizi joined the AINA Afghan Media and Culture Center’s training program for women – it was the first time in a decade that women had been trained as camera operators, and the first time they received training in digital media. The culmination of the program was the documentary shown during the tour.

“When I got my camera and I went to film in the provinces, people were wide-eyed to see a woman working a camera,” said Azizi. Even today, some object to seeing a woman behind a camera, she adds.

A long way to go

In the past five years, while the situation for women has changed in Afghanistan, affirm the journalists, they stress that the increased freedom is mainly evident in cities and that in the rural areas, the improvements, if any, are minimal, or negligible.



Canadian Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for International Co-Operation, Ted Menzies.

Azizi and Ayubi are quick to point out that obstacles remain even within their field. “Women in media are under stress from the public, their families, even other women opposed to seeing them in the media.”

“People who are educated are happy with my work since I’m bringing the Afghan story to the world,” says Azizi.

In the five years that she has been working as a camerawoman she has shot four documentaries, a number of commercials and other short pieces. “It’s a dream come true,” says Azizi.

The Ottawa event, held November 22, was moderated by journalist Kady O'Malley of *Maclean's* magazine.

Canadian Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for International Co-Operation, Ted Menzies delivered opening remarks, and spoke of women's oppression in Afghanistan, and the work Canada is supporting in the country.

Co-founded by acclaimed photojournalist Reza Deghati and several French journalists, the AINA Afghan Media and Culture Center supports democracy in Afghanistan through increased media and cultural expression. AINA's one-year training course for the filmmakers of Afghanistan Unveiled took place between July 2002 and August 2003.